

Commencement Address by E. Gordon Gee
The Ohio State University
Friday, December 12, 1997

This is a glorious day in the life of the university. And this is a bittersweet day for me. It is my 29th and last commencement ceremony as president of The Ohio State University.

Today, I feel very much like a graduating senior. Over these past few weeks, I have revisited all my favorite spots. But unlike some of you who are bleary-eyed, I did not try to visit all of them last night.

I have cleaned out my desk, returned borrowed items — at least the ones I remember — paid all my library fines, and, even with a bad case of senioritis, I managed to finish all my paperwork.

Fortunately, I have been able to tell my family that I am leaving here with a job. One that begins January 2 . . . right after we win the Sugar Bowl!

I know that I am not the only person in this class who has been here more than seven years!

Time has flown since I first donned a scarlet and gray bow tie. Consider all that has happened since 1990.

Over the past seven years, *Twin Peaks* was replaced by *The X-Files*. Johnny Carson was replaced by Jay Leno. *Ghost* was replaced by *Touched by an Angel*. The New Kids on the Block were replaced by the Back Street Boys. And Papa Joe's was replaced with . . . well, I guess some things just can't be replaced!

I have been here so long, I remember when the kids on 90210 were starting high school, when Travolta was just a former "sweathog," and when Madonna didn't have a baby.

I remember when the Lennox Center was a furnace factory, when Brueggers was Rax, and Brenen's was the "Kentucky Taco Hut."

Over the years, competition and rivalries have been intense: Tyson versus Holyfield, Coke versus Pepsi, Ohio State versus that school up north, and everyone versus traffic and parking.

At Ohio Stadium, Pink Floyd and the Stones rocked the crowd, and the Buckeyes rocked Notre Dame.

New phrases entered the lexicon: "Road Rage," "Don't Go There," and "Show Me the Money."

While it seems like a short time, events suggest that a lot can happen in seven years. Consider this list:

The Soviet Union broke up,
 Kuwait flared up,
 George Bush threw up,
 Whitewater heated up,
 The Hubble looked up,
 Los Angeles shook up,
 Oklahoma City blew up,
 a Million Men stepped up,
 The Cleveland Browns packed up,
 Ellen spoke up,
 Campaign reform fired up,
 And septuplets showed up,

The only thing constant is change.

I have thought a lot about what I could tell you, my last graduating class, that will serve you well whatever your direction in life, whatever change lies ahead.

My message for you is simply this: Do good. And try to make a difference.

I leave you with these challenges because, as never before, the world needs your compassion and creativity, your civility and good deeds.

My father's generation had an enemy. It had a face and a name. It was Hitler and the Swastika. And it was defeated.

My generation had an enemy. It too had a face and a name. It was the Red Menace, the Soviet Bloc, Khrushchev and Andropov, the Hammer and Sickle. And it, too, was defeated.

Today's generation has an enemy more difficult to define. It is without a single face or label. It is homelessness and heartlessness. Disease and despair. Domestic violence and international terror. A lack of civility and loss of respect.

In short, the enemy is us. And you, my friends, are the foot soldiers in this battle.

Watching the evening news, it is easy to become discouraged about the state of humankind. Schools use metal detectors to keep out guns and knives. Universities have speech and behavior codes to stem hatred and disrespect. Political campaigns resemble food fights, and the Internet is littered with obscenity. All this in a society where we actually debate the over-the-counter availability of assault weapons.

The nation's concern about values was revealed in a *U.S. News & World Report* study last year. Nine out of ten people surveyed believe that the decline in civility increases opportunities

for violence. Eight out of ten believe that it divides our communities and erodes our moral values.

There is no question that the individual is glorified in our popular culture — even individuals whose behavior is deviant or bizarre. John Ong, former chairman of the B.F. Goodrich Company, told our graduates last year, "Dennis Rodman may choose to live his life by being 'as bad as he wants to be,' but is popularizing the bad really good for our children and grandchildren?"

One can only imagine the impact of the most recent NBA headline story — the physical attack on a coach by one of his own players.

We are bombarded with media messages of excess and misspent success. Over the din of whining and wrangling, I hope you can hear my call for community, for caring about others. And I hope we have prepared you well.

It is imperative that we, as educators, provide you with the knowledge to think clearly within and beyond your professions — not merely skills connected to commerce, but skills connected to the intellect, the spirit, and the community.

That is what the General Education Curriculum is all about — those sometimes dreaded G.E.C.s. That is why we want engineers to know Shakespeare and English majors to understand economics. The world's problems are not divided into academic categories. Solutions are often found at the confluence of science and humanities, intellect and intuition, head and heart.

The biggest educational challenge we face today is helping our students develop character and conscience, civility and respect. Simply put, universities must provide an education not just of value, but of values.

We must bring the notion of values back into the classroom. We must introduce words that have been lost in our lexicon in recent decades. Words like community. Integrity. Respect. Ethics. Service. Concern for the common good.

More than just saying these words, we must live these values. And that is the challenge.

It is not easy doing what you believe is right. I know. I'm the guy who knocked on doors on 12th Avenue and asked total strangers, many not even Ohio State students, to change the way they celebrate.

Yes, as the *Lantern* pointed out again last week, I'm the guy who suggested students drink Kool-Aid instead of beer. OK, so, maybe "bug juice" wasn't the best suggestion. Maybe I should

have said Mountain Dew or Jolt. But I stick by the point, however unpopular, because I believe it is right.

I ask you again: Do good. Try to make a difference. Individually and together, you can change your world.

Harvard's Robert Putnam studied the revitalization of American democracy. He reported a decline in group affiliations by individuals. From the PTA to the League of Women Voters, Putnam reported dwindling membership.

But the observation most quoted from Putnam's work is his comment that while more Americans were bowling than ever before, the number of people bowling in leagues had dropped. We are "bowling alone," in sport and in much of our civic life.

We are increasingly isolated by technology and by changes in lifestyle. Bowling alone.

We used to know the name of the corner grocer. Now it is a changing cast of teenagers at the U.D.F.

We used to deal with bank tellers. Now we do business at the A.T.M.

We used to talk to one another walking down the street. Now, people wearing headsets and Walkmen are immersed in their own universe.

We used to gather around the television set — watching TV was a social experience. Now, your only companions are a bowl of popcorn and the remote control.

We scarcely know our neighbors. Wouldn't we all be better off with a neighbor like Wilson who, every week, helps Tim Allen raise his family, manage his business, and solve his problems?

If we are to be a civil society, we must rebuild our institutions and reweave the fabric of families, communities, and a society that sometimes seems at loose ends. At the heart of this endeavor is education.

I call upon you to commit yourselves to lifelong learning, to insist on quality education from kindergarten through college and beyond. Because education can reweave a fabric torn by economic inequity and social injustice.

As educated women and men, you are the beacons on the hill. From you, we expect great things.

Someone in this class will cure a disease, publish a novel, invent a machine, win national acclaim. But, by doing "great

things" I also mean running for school board, volunteering at a nursing home, building a strong family, reading to a child, being kind to a stranger, being a good friend. We expect such great things from you.

And all of us expect great things from Ohio State. It is one of America's great universities. And it will continue its dash toward even greater distinction. Its greatest days are ahead.

For the past four, five, seven years, we have been bound by a scarlet and gray thread. This university has been our community. It has connected us to people unlike ourselves. It has replaced social isolation with intellectual interaction. It has challenged and changed us. The lessons learned here will serve you, and me, well in the wider world.

I learned many things from Ohio State. I learned that a big place can become as intimate as home. That our size and scale are great advantages. That there is no presidential power at Shamrock Towing.

I learned that questions are often better than answers. I learned that change is hard, and slow, but necessary to adapt to the demands of the next century.

Like many of you, I found love during my days at Ohio State. Constance and I learned the joy of walking hand-in-hand across the Oval, sometimes with our dog Lucy.

I am a better person for having been at Ohio State. And so are all of you.

That is why I am so optimistic about the future. I see before me young and not-so-young people who love learning, who are committed to service, and who thrive on change.

You will lead us forward. I ask you to do good. I know you will make a difference.

On graduation day, each of you expects to hear some advice. I will not disappoint you. Here is some of my best advice for you.

- Always carry a safety pin.
- Buy a good alarm clock.
- Never answer an e-mail from www.troubledloner.
- Help with the dishes.
- Don't use your MasterCard to pay your Visa bill.
- Stand for something, even if you stand alone.
- Never give up.
- Laugh often.
- And always, always remember your alma mater.

We will not forget you.

I offer you my personal congratulations, my affection, my love, my gratitude for the opportunities I have had as president, and my very best wishes.

Godspeed on your remarkable journey. Thank you.